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PRICE 23/15



A SIMPLE LUST DENNIS BRUTUS

Collected Poems
of South African Jail & Exile
including
letters to Martha

"a grace and penetration
unmatched even by
Alexander Solzhenitsyn"
The Guardian

A Simple Lust

Selected poems including

Sirens Knuckles Boots

Letters to Martha

Poems from Algiers

Thoughts Abroad

Dennis Brutus



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LONDON · IBADAN · NAIROBI

Heinemann Educational Books Ltd
22 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3HH
P.M.B. 5205 Ibadan · P.O. Box 45314 Nairobi
EDINBURGH MELBOURNE AUCKLAND
HONG KONG SINGAPORE KUALA LUMPUR NEW DELHI
KINGSTON PORT OF SPAIN
Heinemann Educational Books Inc.
4 Front Street, New Hampshire 03833, USA

ISBN 0 435 90115 X

© Dennis Brutus 1963, 1968, 1970, 1971 and 1973
First published Heinemann Educational Books 1973
First published in African Writers Series 1973
Reprinted 1977, 1979, 1981, 1984

Photoset in Malta
by St Paul's Press Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd
Bungay, Suffolk

On The Island

1

Cement-grey floors and walls
cement-grey days
cement-grey time
and a grey susurrations
as of seas breaking
winds blowing
and rains drizzling

A barred existence
so that one did not need to look
at doors or windows
to know that they were sundered by bars
and one locked in a grey gelid stream
of unmoving time.

The sounds begin again;
the siren in the night
the thunder at the door
the shriek of nerves in pain.

Then the keening crescendo
of faces split by pain
the wordless, endless wail
only the unfree know.

Importunate as rain
the wraiths exhale their woe
over the sirens, knuckles, boots;
my sounds begin again.

and endure . . .

2

One learns quite soon
that nails and screws
and other sizeable bits of metal
must be handed in;

and seeing them shaped and sharpened
one is chilled, appalled
to see how vicious it can be
— this simple, useful bit of steel:

and when these knives suddenly flash
– produced perhaps from some disciplined anus –
one grasps at once the steel-bright horror
in the morning air
and how soft and vulnerable is naked flesh.

3

Suddenly one is tangled
in a mesh of possibilities:
notions cobweb around your head,
tendrils sprout from your guts in a hundred
directions:

why did this man stab this man for that man?
what was the nature of the emotion
and how did it grow?
was this the reason for a warder's unmotivated
senseless brutality?
by what shrewdness was it instigated?

desire for prestige or lust for power?
Or can it – strange, most strange! – be love,
strange love?
And from what human hunger was it born?

6

Two men I knew specifically
among many cases:
their reactions were enormously different
but a tense thought lay at the bottom of each
and for both there was danger and fear and pain —
drama.

One simply gave up smoking
knowing he could be bribed
and hedged his mind with romantic fantasies
of beautiful marriageable daughters;

the other sought escape
in fainting fits and asthmas
and finally fled into insanity:

so great the pressures to enforce sodomy.

7

Perhaps most terrible are those who beg for it,
who beg for sexual assault.

To what desperate limits are they driven
and what fierce agonies they have endured
that this, which they have resisted,
should seem to them preferable,
even desirable.

It is regarded as the depths
of absolute and ludicrous submission.
And so perhaps it is.

But it has seemed to me
one of the most terrible
most rendingly pathetic
of all a prisoner's predicaments.

17

In prison
the clouds assume importance
and the birds

[65]

With a small space of sky
cut off by walls
of bleak hostility
and pressed upon by hostile authority
the mind turns upwards
when it can –

– there can be no hope
of seeing the stars:
the arcs and fluorescents
have blotted them out –

the complex aeronautics
of the birds
and their exuberant acrobatics
become matters for intrigued speculation
and wonderment

clichés about the freedom of the birds
and their absolute freedom from care
become meaningful

and the graceful unimpeded motion of the clouds
– a kind of music, poetry, dance –
sends delicate rhythms tremoring through the flesh
and fantasies course easily through the mind:
– where are they going
where will they dissolve
will they be seen by those at home
and whom will they delight?

18

I remember rising one night
after midnight
and moving
through an impulse of loneliness
to try and find the stars.

And through the haze
the battens of fluorescents made
I saw pinpricks of white
I thought were stars.

Greatly daring
I thrust my arm through the bars
and easing the switch in the corridor
plunged my cell in darkness

I scampered to the window
and saw the splashes of light
where the stars flowered.

But through my delight
thudded the anxious boots
and a warning barked
from the machine-gun post
on the catwalk.

And it is the brusque inquiry
and threat
that I remember of that night
rather than the stars.

[20 December 1965]

At a Funeral

Black, green and gold at sunset: pageantry
And stubbled graves: expectant, of eternity,
In bride's-white, nun's-white veils the nurses gush
 their bounty
Of red-wine cloaks, frothing the bugled dirging
 slopes
Salute! Then ponder all this hollow panoply
For one whose gifts the mud devours, with our
 hopes.

Oh all you frustrate ones, powers tombed in dirt,
Aborted, not by Death but carrion books of birth
Arise! The brassy shout of Freedom stirs our earth;
Not Death but death's-head tyranny scythes our
 ground
And plots our narrow cells of pain defeat and
 dearth:
Better that we should die, than that we should lie
 down.

*[Velencia Majombozi, who died shortly
after qualifying as a doctor]*

Nightsong: City

Sleep well, my love, sleep well:
the harbour lights glaze over restless docks,
police cars cockroach through the tunnel streets;

from the shanties creaking iron-sheets
violence like a bug-infested rag is tossed
and fear is immanent as sound in the wind-swung
bell;

the long day's anger pants from sand and rocks;
but for this breathing night at least,
my land, my love, sleep well.

land & love
are brought
together

The sounds begin again;
the siren in the night
the thunder at the door
the shriek of nerves in pain.

Then the keening crescendo
of faces split by pain
the wordless, endless wail
only the unfree know.

Importunate as rain
the wraiths exhale their woe
over the sirens, knuckles, boots;
my sounds begin again.

For a Dead African

We have no heroes and no wars
only victims of a sickly state
succumbing to the variegated sores
that flower under lashing rains of hate.

We have no battles and no fights
for history to record with trite remark
only captives killed on eyeless nights
and accidental dyings in the dark.

Yet when the roll of those who died
to free our land is called, without surprise
these nameless unarmed ones will stand beside
the warriors who secured the final prize.

*[John Nangoza Jebe: shot by the police in a
Good Friday procession in Port Elizabeth 1956]*

Waiting *(South African Style):* *'Non-Whites Only'*

1

At the counter an ordinary girl
with unemphatic features and
a surreptitious novelette
surveys with Stanislav disdain
my verminous existence and consents
with langorous reluctance —
the dumpling nose acquiring chiselled charm
through puckering distaste —
to sell me postage stamps:
she calculates the change on knuckly fingertips
and wordless toothless-old-man mumbling lips.

2

Was ever office-tea-coloured tea as good as this
or excited such lingering relishing ever?
Railway schedules hoot at me derision
as trains run on their measured rods of time:
But here in this oasis of my impotence
the hours dribble through lacunae in my guts:
Stoic yourself for some few hours more
till the Civil Service serves — without civility:
'Arsenic and Old Lace' andantes through my head.